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AUTHOR Greene, Maxine
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ABSTRACT

Paul Goodman's work in psychology, social criticism, linguistics, and education deserves reconsideration. His thoughts and language found their audience among the youth of the 60's who used them to articulate rebellion. The "system," viewed by Goodman, was nonexploitive but seemed to rob young people of a sense of significance. Goodman saw alternatives dependent upon self-motivated individuals willing to take small, independent actions that chipped away at the system. Far-ranging revolutionary change was not required; personal authenticity was. The schools as one aspect of the system were to be countered by alternatives that functioned improvisationally and did not intrude on the individual or superimpose socialization. If today Goodman's alternatives do not appear to constitute an effective means for reform, his observations about reading and language and suggestions for "natural learning" in mini-schools are worth the consideration of educators. (JH)

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Paul Goodman Then and Now:

An Inquiry into Relevance

Maxine Greene
Teachers College
Columbia University

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Paul Goodman

Maxine Greene
Teachers College
Columbia University

"The approach I took in Growing Up Absurd is the same I took 15 years earlier in a collection of essays called Drawing the Line. It is an old anarchist position. When you get an over-centralized society devoting itself to rather useless goods, empty power, statism and big corporations--the only way to stay alive is to draw the line."[1] This was Goodman in a Psychology Today interview in 1971, talking about survival and independent action and "being in the world." It seems clear enough that the work he did in the domains of psychology, social criticism, linguistics, and education must be viewed within an anarchist frame. In spite of Henry David Thoreau's appeal to generations of "poor students" and alienated men, anarchism has had a relatively minor impact on American political and educational thought. Goodman himself spent twenty five years raising questions about depersonalization, centralism, and manipulation before achieving popular success with his writing at the beginning of the last decade. This was because of the overlap between the kinds of things being said in a just-

burgeoning counter-culture and Goodman's articulation of what had long been viewed as a counter-ideal to affluence and "top-down" control. Today, when the sense of powerlessness has been exacerbated, when confidence in the "revolution of consciousness"[2] has drained away, the question of his relevance must be dealt with from a new perspective, with different perceptions of context and possibility.

In Growing Up Absurd, Goodman discerned intimations of the future in the rebellions of the Beat Generation, acting out (as he saw it) "a critique of the organized system that everybody in some sense agrees with" and providing a kind of major pilot study of the use of leisure in an economy of abundance."[3] The Port Huron Statement[4] had been written by the time he composed most of the essays in People or Personnel; but he was simply elaborating on his own tradition when he discussed the very issues that so concerned the founders of S.D.S.: powerlessness, estrangement, the impacts of the "present centralized style of social organization."[5] The student leaders were reacting to a generalized apathy, to "the actual separation of people from power, from relevant knowledge, from pinnacles of decision-making." When their feelings of outrage moved them towards social reform, it was done in the mode of community organization or civil rights protest. Goodman, speaking favorably of "para-legal movements," went on to talk optimistically of the way "poor Negroes and Puerto Ricans, bearded students, and Bohemian artists exercise citizenly initiative and engage in reform politics."[6] At once, he was talking about what it actually meant to be a full and serious

human being within a society characterized by "meaningless management" and a "showy style of life."[7] When the dissenters began living lives of voluntary poverty, defying militarism, IBM cards, roles, perquisites, and the rest, it was as if Goodman's was an idea whose time had come. He wrote with increasing persuasiveness about "meaningless enterprise,"[8] the need for "Lernfreiheit," the search for new forms of community.

The matter of his influence, like the larger issue of the counter-culture's rise and fall, remains to be explored; but his language obviously assisted young people in their efforts to articulate what they were convinced was wrong. In Speaking and Language, Goodman insisted that speaking is a mode of action and that language functions primarily to create meanings--that it "shapes how people think, feel, and judge what is functional."[9] His writings did not launch the protest movements; but they played some part in focusing those movements and shaping judgments of what was possible. In the same fashion, they helped to shape a radical critique of the schools, especially when that critique shed light on social structures, coercion of the young, and the evils of compulsory education. It was Goodman, with his anarchist hopes, who first proposed the "de-schooling" Ivan Illich so effectively popularized.[10] There was, unquestionably, an overlap between Illich's disestablishmentarianism where the Catholic Church was concerned and Goodman's vision of the school system as a "compulsory trap." Again, the direct, cranky Goodman voice helped to shape how diverse individuals came to feel about the peculiar institution of schooling. No matter how wrong-headed he might turn out to be, he had a great gift for defining alternatives

in situations whose structures seemed in some manner God-given, unchangeable by human hands.

The alternatives he saw depended upon self-motivated individuals willing to take small, independent actions, willing to take risks and perform experiments without concern for official strictures, or the official tests of validity. The consciousness behind all this was steeped in anarchist tradition: the objects of his perceiving and judging were <u>particular</u> individuals and arrangements; human beings who were rational and capable of autonomy. In an essay called "The Black Flag of Anarchism," he ascribed to militant young people the anarchist feelings that sustained him throughout his life and, in so doing, he explained what anarchism meant to him: "They believe," he wrote, in local power, community development, rural reconstruction, decentralist organization, so they can have a say. They prefer a simpler standard of living. Though their protests generate violence, they themselves tend to non-violence and are internationally pacifist. But they do not trust the due process of administrators and are quick to resort to direct action and civil disobedience."[11] Obviously, this is a latter-day expression of one of the more pacific strands in the anarchist tradition. It evokes Peter Kropotkin's view that anarchism was simply a theory of life under which society was conceived without government. Harmony in such a society, he said, would be achieved through "free agreements concluded between various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction

of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being."[12] It evokes, also, Alexander Berkman's affirmation that anarchism meant "a condition of society where all men and women are free and where all enjoy equally the benefits of an ordered and sensible life."[13] It raises the echoes of Emma Goldman's call for liberation of mind and body, for a social order "based on the free grouping of individuals for the purpose of producing real social wealth."[14] There is no serious talk here about collective consciousness or revolutionary classes. The ownership of the means of production is not a prime issue, nor is any theory of surplus value or of alienation caused by separation of the worker from the product of his work. Freedom and self-determination are both presumed. Through the acts of free men exploitative systems can be made to give way to simpler and more economical ways of doing things. Production, freed of "top-down" regulations and busywork, can be geared to function and utility. The authoritative state, under such conditions, will not be necessary. Action will at last be self-chosen and voluntary; persons, each one fundamentally decent (when not pressed out of shape by rulers and organizers), will be able to determine the course of their own lives.

Goodman put his stress on what he called the "system" rather than government or the state. It is not always easy to discover what he meant by the "system," although he identified it with the dominant mode of organization in the United States. He did not see it in economic terms, as the Marxists do; he not take Jacques Ellul's view that a self-generating "technique" lies behind the managerial organization.[15] He did

not even see it as primarily exploitative, and this fact helps to explain his view that individuals, creating themselves as persons rather than personnel, could make a significant difference. It also helps to explain why he believed the youth movement could be such an effective counter-force. He wrote, in Like a Conquered Province, that the major trends in the dominant organization were "its tendency to expand meaninglessly for its own sake, and its tendency to exclude human beings as useless."[16] What he saw was an empty society rather than an affluent one; and he objected to monopolies, advertising, pollution, the neglect of public services, and the predominance of "made-work (or war)" primarily on the grounds that it all led to meaninglessness. Young people, deprived of useful functions and prevented from playing significant parts in the world, became (for him) the exemplary exploited class, largely because they were excluded and because nothing meaningful was offered for them to do. He found among them the seeds of responsibility, moral courage, and communal feeling that might lead to the restoration of a kind of Jeffersonian, town-meeting democracy--a creative involvement, a sense of efficacy. This, rather than deliberate or "liberal" reform; this, rather than outright revolution on the part of the oppressed, would counteract the emptiness and open the way to a decent world.

Meanwhile, he saw the system working through a monolithic school system and effectively flouting "independence, initiative, scrupulous honesty, earnestness, utility, respect for thorough scholarship."[17] He saw it working through "military industrial structures"

to eradicate ordinary human purposes along with "manly" work. He saw it laid out before him in deadly, unplanned urban centers that made unthinkable the development of viable community life. The remedy was to chip away at it, to engage in "creative disorder" when necessary, to create alternative forms of grouping and producing and being in the world. Individuals, especially young middle-class individuals, had the capacity to understand that the system was man-made and could be undone by people resolutely refusing to be personnel. First as Gestalt psychologist, then as city-planner, teacher, poet, essayist, novelist, Goodman worked in his non-discursive and personal way to arouse people to integration as mindful, sensual, emotional, and sexual beings destined to create themselves in a concrete, often inhospitable world. Always, there was a concern for alternative ways of living and being together--in rural communities, in the therapeutic atmospheres of mini-schools, in work-camps for adolescents, in urban radio stations, in neighborhood theatres, in decentralized school boards, in free universities, in action organizations functioning in the spirit of participatory democracy. None of these were to be run in terms of rule-books, hierarchies, expertise. They were to be improvisational, easy, open, involving all participants in direct and spontaneous ways. Not only would this promote growth on the part of the individuals concerned; it would, in time, undermine centralism and the intricacy of the system, which would not be able to tolerate the tensions set up and the refusal of increasing numbers to be "resigned" to the status quo.

The difference between Goodman and both Dewey and Marx should be clear. It is clear enough that Goodman was much affected by the work

of the early pragmatists, which he saw influenced more by Populism than the labor movement before "the lapse of Populism into Progressivism and modern Liberalism."[18] Regulatory agencies, progressive income taxes, women's suffrage, planning, welfare legislation, extended schooling--all these, he said, "have cumulatively added up to the one interlocked system of big government, big corporations, big municipalities, big labor, big education, and big communications, in which all of us are pretty regimented and brainwashed, and in which direct initiative and deciding have become difficult or impossible."[19] Like the revisionist historians of education (whose theories he may well have made possible), he saw the seeds of corporate planning, "a useless economy, a caste system, a dangerous conformity" in the pragmatic concern for method, cooperative intelligence, and social harmony, for all the pragmatists' challenge to waste and greed. It was not only that Goodman opposed coalition politics and centralized planning and the rest. He was not concerned, as Dewey was, with the discovery of an articulate democratic public. Dewey, for all his commitment to face-to-face relationships and his resistance to monopolies of knowledge by experts or philosopher-kings, believed that deliberate planning was needed to make local communities "genuine centers of the attention, interest, and devotion for their constituent members." He wrote, in The Public and Its Problems, that some day "organization may cease to be taken as an end in itself. Then it will no longer be mechanical and external, hampering the free play of artistic gifts, fettering men and women with chains of conformity, conducing to

abdication of all which does not fit into the automatic movement of organization as a self-sufficing thing. Organization as a means to an end would reenforce individuality and enable it to be securely itself by endowing it with resources beyond its unaided reach."[20] The problem was not, according to Dewey, for men to separate themselves from society (or even from what Goodman called the system). It was to discover ways of adjudicating differences, of shaping flexible social policies of a kind that would sustain individuality and nurture personal growth.

Dewey, unlike Goodman, was not inclined to celebrate "voluntary poverty"; nor was he as likely to discover a healthy significance and simplicity in the lives of the poor. Goodman's preoccupation with the anomie and the anxiety of the middle class, particularly the middle class young, distinguishes him sharply from the Marxists as well. He explicitly and on many occasions declared that he believed Marxist solutions to be irrelevant in an over-expanded, managerial society. Profit-making, he said, can be benign. A "decent poverty" can be made possible with increases in minimum wages, expanding unionization, and "a guaranteed minimum income, which would be far preferable in the United States to the present system of welfare payments and social services." The implication is that far-ranging revolutionary change is not required, that it might do more damage to persons than a maintenance of the present economic system, assuming that the "counter-forces" could work. Libertarianism and the quest for personal authenticity, he appeared to be arguing, would constitute sufficient opposition to "the overcentralized, inter-

locking, and empty society." He shared the Marxist concern for "demystification," in the sense that he spent much of his life challenging the idols and superstitions used to lull people into acquiescence. He expressed occasional dismay at "the Iron Law of Wages," at the military-industrial complex, at "the scientific war corporations, the blimps, the horses' asses, the police, the administrative bureaucracy, the career diplomats; the lobbies, the corporations that contribute Party funds...."[21] His fundamental effort, however, was not to develop a program for social reconstruction but to move persons to concern themselves with private business, "to live communally and without authority, to work usefully and feel friendly, and so positively to replace an area of power with peaceful functioning."[22]

His restiveness with planning, with power, with programs enabling people to secure what they could not secure through their own effort, helps explain his approach to education and the schools. In Growing Up Absurd, it is true, he spoke warmly of the "revolutionary program of progressive education" that once "drew on every radical idea since the middle of the eighteenth century, in pedagogy, politics, socialist and communitarian theory, epistemology, esthetics, anthropology, and psychiatry."[23] But he believed that its original concern for teaching people how to be in-the-world gave way to an emphasis on the easy adjustment demanded by the dominant class. By the time he began writing Compulsory Mis-Education, the focus had shifted to the "trap" set by the

schools. "The advance guard problem," he wrote (creating a language for what would soon be called the "romantic" critique), "is that the compulsory school system, like the whole of our economy, politics, and standard of living, has become a lockstep. It is no longer designed for the maximum growth and future practical utility of the children into a changing world, but is inept social engineering for extrinsic goals, pitifully short-range. Even when it is benevolent, it is in the bureaucratic death-grip of a uniformity of conception, from the universities down, that cannot possibly suit the multitude of disposition and conditions."[24] And he proceeded to call, as is well known, for the end of compulsory schooling.

It is interesting to note that he did not place his analysis in any historical perspective. He did not discuss the historical role of the schools in serving the requirements of a developing industrial society; nor did he touch upon the "legend" of the public schools where the equalization of opportunity was concerned. The school system "has become," he said, "a lockstep. It is no longer designed for the maximum growth...." Once again, he seemed to be responding to and discovering some articulation for what he considered to be significant tendencies on the social scene: Summerhill schools were appearing in slum areas and in the suburbs; "a combination of education and direct social action is springing up on all sides"; "the new advance of progressive education is a good index of what the real situation is."

In spite of what now appears to be a faulty diagnosis of "the real situation," Goodman did present some concrete and serious

ideas respecting education. Some of these are clearly attributable to Dewey's influence and that of A.S. Neill; some, to the anarchist centering on the individual and his private concerns. But the uniqueness of Goodman's proposals seems to have been a function of his ability to see the anxiety of children trying to cope with an overwhelming system, the frustration of a boy unable to use a hammer, the "sexless" climate in the classrooms, the ambivalence of young men in search of jobs, the teachers' evasions when asked to defend grading, the defiance of a gang committing "delinquencies." A great deal, of course, must have been projection; but his sensitivity to what has been called the phenomenology of schooling made it possible for his readers (and his youthful sympathizers) to ask questions of a sort they had never framed before. Even today, the concreteness of his vision may serve as a corrective for abstract formulations of what happens in classrooms and (we would hope) for the language of management science which so effectively obscures what it means for children to be, to struggle to make sense of their worlds.

Goodman's conception of mini-schools is well known; but perhaps not so well known is the relevance of this idea for an approach to the teaching of the poor. He proposed a "tiny school" with four teachers for twenty eight children in, preferably, "found" space in a store front, a housing project room that could be transformed into a clubhouse if needed. He said that "top-down administration" would not be needed because of the small size; and that there would be no principal and no secretary. He went on to talk about the appropriateness of his model for the "natural learning of reading": the opportunities for exposure to neighborhood activities;

the provisions for flexibility in approach. ("Given so many contexts, the teacher can easily strike when the iron is hot, whether reading the destination of a bus or the label on a can of soup. When some children catch on quickly and forge ahead on their own, the teacher need not waste their time and can concentrate on those who are more confused."[25]) This, along with his insistence on the need to combat blandness and verbiage, and on the importance of making people understand that reading is "a special useful art with a proper subject-matter, imagination and truth, rather than a means of communicating top-down decisions and advertising," can be very suggestive. Educators who see connections between the pursuit of meanings and personal liberation may still, without sentimentality, pay heed.

Goodman sounded the same or similar themes in his treatments of education on other levels. Always, he demanded justifications for the "deliberate intervention" in people's lives entailed by schooling. He talked of the value of incidental education and the ways in which the schools had taken over "the more natural incidental education of most other institutions."[26] In The Community of Scholars, he objected to the relations that presently obtain between school and society. "If the schools," he wrote, "are used for free growth, criticism and social experiment, the socializing of the young becomes a two-way transaction: the young grow up into society, and society is regularly enlivened, made sensible, and altered by the fact that the young must grow up into it. Such social purposes preserve the community of scholars from becoming incestuous and merely academic....Perhaps this is what Jefferson meant

by the need of a revolution every twenty years, every new generation."[27] He did not think this could happen if education were made subservient to "national goals"; nor did he think it could happen if young people were not freed from continuous tutelage to choose what they wanted to learn. He thought they were earnest enough and confident enough; it was the Organization that insisted on making them into personnel. The culture he would have liked to teach, he said, would be the culture of the Western tradition: "the values of Greece, the Bible, Christianity, Chivalry, the Free Cities of the twelfth century, the Renaissance, the heroic age of Science, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, early nineteenth century Utilitarianism, late nineteenth century Naturalism."[28] But he knew (and sadly admitted) that students would have no patience with that. They had no sense of history; they had no tolerance for objective subject matter. This was because of the way they had been socialized; it was because the elite had imposed on itself "a morale fit for slaves." In consequence, youth compensated for powerlessness by nourishing "astonishing private conceits," by taking drugs, by groundless and unreasonable commitments. Somehow or other, Goodman mused, education "must unmake the anomie and anxiety...."

He was not very hopeful at the end. First there were the doubts occasioned by the authoritarianism of certain young people, by their presumptuous choosing for other people, by their anticipation of a future without meaningful work. Then there were the experiences with hipsterism, violence anti-intellectualism, authoritarianism; and suddenly Goodman was presenting himself ironically as "neolithic

conservative" and (like the characters in his 1963 novel) somehow deciding that all there was was "Making Do."

What does it all mean today? As anarchist, Goodman represented one of several divergent themes in the development of social and educational thought. His critique of the system, his demand for alternatives, and his sketches of what community might signify in an "empty" world hang in the memory of those who have read him, attended to him, tried to discover what he really meant to say. But there are terrible realities in the present decade, and there are few illusions left. We know more than we admitted in earlier years about the inequities in our society and the injustices. We understand better than we did the corruptions and deceptions in high places; and we know that it is not enough for the sensitive and the restless to withdraw. This is a moment for the nurture of critical consciousness on all levels of society, on all levels of the school. It is a moment when it is a luxury, a waste for us to go off in search of alternative communities. Manipulations have to be dealt with inside the institutions that exist; the new cults of efficiency have to be confronted; deliberate and intentional efforts must be made to arouse the young to learn how to learn. Above all, cynicism and hopelessness must be overcome through serious work in the midst of the system, in the face of deteriorating norms. The crucial problem is the problem of empowering people to overcome their own submergence in reality, to begin thinking critically, to engage in <u>praxis</u> and transform what is given into what might be.

Let Goodman be remembered for his refusals. Let him be remembered for his visions and his disappointments and his stubborn subjectivity. He reminded us, after all, of primary experience; he keeps nudging us towards personal encounters and being-in-the-world. It continues to be important to remain in touch with ourselves. But there are new problems on the agenda now; and we have to choose ourselves again to reconceive, to renew, to transform.

1. "Paul Goodman, A Conversation by Robert W. Glasgow," Psychology Today, November 1971, p. 62.

2. Charles A. Reich, The Greening of America (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 226.

3. Paul Goodman, Growing Up Absurd (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), p. 170.

4. "From the Port Huron Statement," in The New Student Left, ed. Mitchell Cohen and Dennis Hale (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 15.

5. Paul Goodman, People or Personnel (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p.75.

6. People or Personnel, p. 49.

7. Goodman, Like a Conquered Province (New York, Vintage Books, 1968), p. p. 257.

8. Like a Conquered Province, pp. 279-291.

9. Goodman, Speaking and Language: Defence of Poetry (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 26.

10. Ivan Illich, Deschooling Society (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971).

11. Goodman "The Black Flag of Anarchism," in Anarchism, ed. Robert Hoffman (New York: Atherton Press, 1970), p. 151.

12. Peter Kropotkin, "Anarchism," Encylopedia Britannica (1947), Vol. I, p. 873.

13. Now and After: The ABC of Communist Anarchism (New York: Vanguard Press, 1929), p. xi.

14. Emma Goldman, "Anarchism: What It Really Stands For," in Anarchism, p. 45.

15. Goodman, People or Personnel, p. 73; Like a Conquered Province, pp. 297-298.

16. Goodman, Like a Conquered Province, p. 265.

17. Goodman, Compulsory Mis-Education (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), p. 26.

18. Goodman, People or Personnel, p. 44.

19. People or Personnel, p. 45.

20. John Dewey, The Public and Its Problems (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1954 (1927)), p. 216.

21. Goodman, People or Personnel, p. 188.

22. Ibid.

23. Goodman, Growing Up Absurd, p. 81.

24. Goodman, Compulsory Mis-Education, pp.45-46.

25. Goodman, "Mini-Schools: A Prescription for the Reading Problem," The New York Review, January 4, 1968, p. 71.

26. Goodman, "The Present Moment in Education," The New York Review, April 10, 1969, p. 14.

27. Goodman, The Community of Scholars (New York: Vintage Books,1964), p. 216.

28. Compulsory Mis-Education, p. 114.